

CABINET
13TH JULY 2021

Minutes of the meeting of the Cabinet of Flintshire County Council held virtually via Zoom on Tuesday 13th July 2021.

PRESENT: Councillor Ian Roberts (Chair)

Councillors: Glyn Banks, Chris Bithell, Derek Butler, Dave Hughes, Paul Johnson, Christine Jones, and Billy Mullin.

IN ATTENDANCE:

Head of Legal Services, Chief Officer (Housing and Assets), Corporate Finance Manager, Income Generation and Marketing Manager, Regulatory Service Manager, Senior Manager – Children and Workforce, IT Infrastructure Manager, School Improvement Monitoring Officer, Customer Contact Service Manager, and Team Leader – Democratic Services.

OTHER MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Councillor: Patrick Heesom.

13. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

14. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 15th June 2021 were submitted and confirmed as a correct.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting be approved as a correct record.

15. DIGITAL FLINTSHIRE

Councillor Mullin introduced the report and explained that, in the four years since the Digital Strategy was approved, there had been many changes, not least because the Council had completed objectives within the document. There had also been changes in the wider strategic context such as Welsh Governments digital that helped to define common minimum standards across the whole of Wales. Most significantly were the changes needed to adapt to lockdown which had accelerated demand for, and the delivery of, digital services.

It was now appropriate to review and revise the strategy to reflect those factors and the revised draft incorporated learning, experiences, growth and ambition. It also featured as a separate theme objective to help reduce the exclusion that could be suffered without access to the skills, devices or connectivity needed to take advantage of digital services.

The IT Infrastructure Manager commented on the successful Member workshops on Digital Strategy that had recently taken place, and explained that

the report had been considered at Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee where it was supported.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of people able to work from home had increased from 800 to over 1500 within 10 days. Examples were given of where the Council had responded to the pandemic by delivering work in different ways, with two examples being enabling remote learning by providing remote access solutions to schools and supplying devices and mobile Wifi units to digitally disadvantaged learners throughout Flintshire. Other examples were outlined in the report.

The Customer Contact Service Manager explained that as part of refreshing the objectives within the Council's Strategy following a review by Audit Wales, work was undertaken to identify:

- Demands and expectations of service users;
- Areas for development; and
- Changes to working practices and procedures

They were reflected in the revised Strategy, along with the changes outlined in the report.

Work was currently underway to ensure that the projects and ambitions within the Strategy also had accurate costings assigned. That would create a funding plan and ensure that any potential funding gaps were identified as early as possible.

Consultation would take place with user groups and residents throughout the summer.

All Members commented on the importance of digital, particularly since the pandemic, which had seen reductions in travel time for meetings which were no held virtually and the support given to residents, particularly those who were vulnerable.

In response to a question from Councillor Bithell, the Customer Contact Service Manager explained that the Flintshire Connects Centres offered access to PC's and iPads and were still operating within the social distances rules.

Councillor Banks asked a question on the North Wales Councils Regional Emergency Planning Service under 'Digital Partnership'. The IT Infrastructure Manager explained that this related to a piece of work that had been completed where Flintshire County Council provided IT infrastructure and reconfigured devices for the Emergency Planning Team to support their co-location to Welsh Government (WG) offices in Llandudno junction.

RESOLVED:

(a) That the progress made in delivering Digital Flintshire 2017/2022 is welcomed;

- (b) That the refreshed Digital Strategy for 2021/2026 be approved pending consultation with user groups; and
- (c) That the Chief Officer (Governance) be granted authority to finalise the policy in consultation with the Deputy Leader of the Council (Governance) and Cabinet Member for Corporate Management and Assets.

16. CARE INSPECTORATE WALES – ASSURANCE VISIT OUTCOMES

Councillor Jones introduced the report and explained that Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) was the independent regulator of Social Care and Childcare in Wales. They regulated social care and early years services using the regulations and national minimum standards set out by Welsh Government (WG) through the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014.

The report presented the findings of the recent CIW Assurance Check of Flintshire Social Services and set out the executive response and action plan to improvement areas identified in the findings letter.

The Assurance Check took place from 19th – 23rd April with eight inspectors meeting with individuals, families, practitioners, managers and partner agencies. CIW concentrated its key lines of enquiry within the four principles of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, which were:

- People – Voice and Control
- Prevention
- Well-being
- Partnership and Integration

The report reflected CIW feedback that there were many strengths in Flintshire Social Services and the inspectors were “assured” that Flintshire was discharging its statutory functions to keep people safe and promote their well-being during the pandemic, and that the Council prevented the need for children to come in to care; and children were returning home to their families where appropriate.

The letter also identified areas for improvement including giving further consideration to the value of independent advocates to support children and young people. It was also identified that an area of improvement was to ensure that there was sufficient evidence in children’s services of the analysis of need and decision making in care records.

Members paid tribute to the Annual Report and thanked all officers involved.

Councillor Bithell asked how the independent advocacy service was offered to young people. The Senior Manager – Children and Workforce explained that the Council was obliged to do an ‘active offer’ so that at key points young people were aware they had the right to an advocate, and what that entailed. It was also raised at each young person’s review. He added that Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) identified that staff were good and proactive in speaking up for children. In response to a further question from Councillor Bithell

on recruitment, the Senior Manager – Children and Workforce explained that Glyndwr was the Council's associated University although recruitment has in the past taken place with graduates from other Universities.

RESOLVED:

That the executive response and action plan be approved.

17. SOCIAL SERVICES ANNUAL REPORT

Councillor Jones introduced the report and explained that the Statutory Director of Social Services was required to produce an annual report summarising their view of the local authority's social care functions and priorities for improvement as legislated in the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and the Regulations and Inspections Act (Wales) 2015.

The report set out the improvement journey and evaluated Social Services' performance in providing services to people that promoted their well-being and supported them to achieve their personal outcomes.

The Foreword had been provided from the Chief Executive who had been instrumental in the social care sector.

Members thanked all staff for the work they had undertaken, particularly during the pandemic.

RESOLVED:

That the final report, taking into account the feedback received from Social and Health Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and noting that the report included key developments of the past year and priorities for next year, be approved.

18. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY (MTFS) AND COUNCIL FUND BUDGET 2022/23

Councillor Johnson introduced the report and explained that the Council reviewed and updated the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) annually, and in advance of planning the annual budget for the following financial year.

The updated forecast showed that the Council would likely have a minimum budget requirement of an additional £16.750m of revenue resources for 2022/23.

This was the first stage of developing the budget for 2022/23. During September and October, the Overview and Scrutiny Committees would be invited to review the cost pressures, and the opportunities for cost control and efficiency, under their respective terms of reference.

Once the work was complete, the Council would be in a strong position to communicate to Governments, local partners and stakeholders and the public how a legal, safe and balanced budget might be achieved for 2022/23 and what

would be required for national funding through Revenue Support Grant (RSG). Engagement was already taking place with the new Welsh Government (WG) through the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA).

Members were aware that whilst some cost savings and efficiencies could be identified as part of the annual budget setting process, there were no cost savings of any scale remaining following a decade of under-funding of local government.

The Council had rightly stood on the principle that it would not reduce the budget for any service to the point where the service was unsafe or to do so would mean the Council would fail to meet its quality standards and/or fail to meet its statutory duties.

The Council had also taken a stance that annual rises in Council Tax should not exceed 5%. That figure was to be treated as a maximum and not an entitlement to raise local income. Council Tax was at risk of becoming unaffordable for an increasing minority, and the Council believed that the responsibility for full and fair funding for local government needed to sit with Governments and not local taxpayers. Therefore, the Local Government Settlement for 2022/23, set and funded by WG, needed to be sufficient.

Councillor Roberts thanked the finance team for dealing with the finances in the way they did, including for the care and attention shown to residents who had been able to make payments to the Council.

The Corporate Finance Manager explained that Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee supported the budget estimate but requested that a review of service balances also be undertaken. The Committee also encouraged all other Overview and Scrutiny Committees to take a rigorous approach.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the additional budget requirement be received and notes, and that feedback from Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee be received;
- (b) That the cost pressures be referred to Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee in September/October for review; and
- (c) That the solutions available to meet the cost pressures be noted, and the funding strategy for 2022/23 be re-set.

19. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING REPORT (OUTTURN)

Councillor Johnson introduced the report which provided the revenue budget final outturn position for the Council Fund and Housing Revenue Account for the financial year 2020/21. The report took into account the latest position on claims made to the Welsh Government (WG) Hardship fund.

The formal Statement of Accounts and supporting notes were submitted to Audit Committee on 15th June and would now be subject to audit over the summer with the final audited accounts presented to Audit Committee in September for formal approval. The Covid-19 pandemic had provided unprecedented challenges for the Council; the financial impact in the last 12 months had been significant and had included cost pressures as a result of the response, such as purchasing PPE, payments to social care providers, accommodation for the homeless and significant reductions in planned income from Council services.

The WG Emergency Hardship Funding Grant provided financial assistance for dealing with the additional costs arising from the pandemic, together with financial assistance to mitigate loss of income from Council Services. In total, the Council was projecting funding of £13.5m for additional expenditure and £4.3m for lost income and that was reflected in the outturn position.

The final year end position was:

Council Fund

- An operating surplus of £2.185m (excluding the impact of the pay award which had been met by reserves), which was a favourable movement of £0.273m from the surplus figure of £1.912m reported at Month 11.
- The operating surplus of £2.185m equated to 0.8% of the Approved Budget, which was marginally above the target MTFS KPI for a variance against budget of 0.5%.
- A contingency reserve balance as at 31st March 2021 of £5.973m

Housing Revenue Account

- Net in-year revenue expenditure to be £2.866m lower than budget.
- A closing un-earmarked balance as at 31st March 2021 of £5.039m.

The report also detailed significant movements from Month 11, key financial risks, Council Tax income, Council Tax reduction scheme, achievements of planned in-year efficiencies, reserves and balances, council fund earmarked reserves and request for carry forward of funding.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the overall report and the Council Fund contingency sum as at 31st March 2021 be noted;
- (b) That the final level of balances on the Housing Revenue Account be noted; and
- (c) That the carry forward requested be approved.

20. CAPITAL PROGRAMME MONITORING 2020/21 (OUTTURN)

Councillor Johnson introduced the report which summarised the final outturn position for 2020/21 together with changes made to the Capital Programme during the last quarter.

The Capital Programme had seen a net reduction in budget of £10.726m during the last quarter which comprised of:

- Net budget reduction in the programme of £3.996m – Council Fund (CF) £4.082m, Housing Revenue Account (HRA) £0.086m
- Net Carry Forward to 2021/22 of £4.352m
- Identified savings at Outturn of £0.650m

Actual expenditure for the year was £62.915m. The final outturn funding surplus from the 2020/21 Capital Programme was £1.968m.

The 2021/22 – 2023/24 Capital Programme was approved on 8th December 2020 with a funding deficit of £1.317m. Following the final local government settlement, the Council received additional funding which resulted in the programme being in a surplus position of £0.144m over the three year period. That surplus carry forward would lead to an opening funding position surplus of £2.112m, prior to the realisation of additional capital receipts and/or other funding sources.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be approved; and
- (b) That the carry forward adjustment requests be approved.

21. PRUDENTIAL INDICATORS – ACTUALS 2020/21

Councillor Johnson introduced the report and explained that under the Prudential Code for Capital Finance in Local Authorities (the Prudential Code), as updated in 2017, Councils were required to set a range of Prudential Indicators. The report provided details of the Council's actual Prudential Indicators for 2020/21 compared with the estimates set for:

- Prudential Indicators for Prudence
- Prudential Indicators for Affordability

RESOLVED:

That the report be approved.

22. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING 2021/22 (INTERIM)

Councillor Johnson introduced the report which provided the first overview of the budget monitoring position for the 2021/22 financial year. It was reported by exception on significant variances which could impact on the financial position in 2021/22.

Based on the high level of assumptions included in the report the potential variations to budget identified by Portfolios equated to a minimum net additional expenditure requirement of £1m.

The ability to mitigate financial risks arising from the pandemic in the first half of the year would largely depend on the continuation of funds for hardship and income loss by Welsh Government (WG). At this stage it was uncertain whether the Hardship Fund would be extended beyond September should current restrictions around the pandemic continue. There was no account taken of the financial risks arising should no additional funding be made available during a prolonged pandemic situation.

A full detailed monitoring report would be provided in September which would update on the overall financial position.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report and the estimated financial impact on the 2021/22 budget be noted;
- (b) That a budget virement of £0.175m between Localities Services to Resources and Regulated Services within Older People's Purchasing budget, and a £0.300 budget virement between Localities Services to Mental Health Residential Budget be approved; and
- (c) That the ring-fencing of allocations from the Contingency Reserve for Investment in Change (£0.400m) and Severe Weather (£0.250m) be approved.

23. ANNUAL REVIEW OF FEES AND CHARGES

Councillor Mullin introduced the report and explained that the 2021 review of fees and charges had been completed in line with the Council's Income Generation Policy, which set out the rationale and process for an annual review of fees and charges. The outcome of that review was detailed in the appendix to the report.

The report outlined the requirements of the annual review of fees and charges for 2022, particularly for those fees and charges subject to an inflationary uplift every three years.

The Income Generation and Marketing Manager said that many of the services charged for, and the rationale, were detailed in the Income Generation Policy, explaining that some were not at the discretion of the Council as they were statutory. A customer friendly version of the schedule of fees and charges would be made available which would outline the frequency of charging (one off, weekly, monthly etc).

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the schedule of fees and charges documented in Appendix A for implementation on 1st October 2021 be approved;
- (b) That a customer friendly version of the schedule of fees and charges be produced and published; and

- (c) That the requirements of the annual review of fees and charges for 2022 be noted, and details of the extent of the achievement of those requirements is captured in the annual review of fees and charges report for 2022 for reporting to Cabinet in July 2022.

24. SIDE WASTE ENFORCEMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

Councillor Banks introduced the report and explained that due to the Covid-19 pandemic, side waste enforcement was suspended in March 2020 and, since that time, an increase of over 3,000 additional tonnes of residual waste had been collected from residential properties, which equated to a 12% increase in comparison to the year before the pandemic.

In addition to an increase in side waste presentation, there had been an increase in household residual waste being presented at communal waste collection points, in alley ways and on open green spaces which had given rise to increased concern around fly tipping and littering. In order to encourage residents to continue to recycle, it was proposed that side waste restrictions needed to be reinstated and enforcement reintroduced on kerbside collections.

The report set out the Council's approach to reintroducing side waste enforcement from 1st September 2021 and how it was proposed to deal with the increase in environmental crimes in an attempt to reduce the antisocial behaviour and improve the Local Environmental Quality (LEQ).

The Regulatory Service Manager explained that prior to any reintroduction of side waste enforcement, a Countywide campaign would be undertaken to ensure that all residents were aware of the change. She confirmed that it was not enhanced enforcement that was being recommended and that the Council wanted to work with residents to offer solutions. Educational campaigns would be undertaken and funding available to undertake those campaigns.

Councillor Roberts expressed his thanks to all of the communities that had come together during the pandemic to provide a litter picking service in their community. He proposed an additional recommendation as he felt there may be a need for dedicated enforcement officers to deal with fly tipping. The additional recommendation was "that a further report be brought back to Cabinet on dedicated additional enforcement officers to deal with side waste and fly tipping".

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the reintroduction of side waste enforcement on kerbside collections for residual waste from 1st September 2021 be approved;
- (b) The proposal for further work to take place to explore the options for a designated role to drive and deliver environmental improvement campaigns within local communities be approved; and
- (c) That a further report be brought back to Cabinet on dedicated additional enforcement officers to deal with side waste and fly tipping.

25. WELFARE REFORM UPDATE

Councillor Mullin introduced the report and explained that the Council, together with its partners, had been working to mitigate the full impacts of welfare reforms from falling upon vulnerable Flintshire residents. The report considered how the Council would continue to manage the impacts of reforms introduced under the provisions of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016.

An update was provided on the impacts that welfare reform continued to have on Flintshire residents and the work that was ongoing to mitigate it and support those households.

Vulnerable households had been impacted significantly by Covid-19 and the report provided information on a range of measures that had been developed to help those affected by the current pandemic and the support provided to residents to help mitigate the negative impacts.

The Chief Officer (Housing and Assets) drew Members' attention to the detail provided in the report, on: removal of the spare room subsidy; benefit cap; Universal Credit, and the impact those had had in Flintshire. He also provided details on: unemployment in Wales; unemployment in Flintshire; help to claim service; UC "managed migration"; County Tax Reduction Scheme; job retention scheme; NHS track and trace isolation support grant payment; carer's bonus payment, support services and discretionary housing payment.

He added that delivery of Personal Budgeting Support was no longer funded by Department of Work and Pensions. However, welfare and budgeting support would continue to be provided by the Welfare Reform Team due to the extra resources that had been secured for the next two years and a further financial pressure had been highlighted for year three.

Members expressed their thanks to the team for all of the help and support provided to residents to help prevent worse situations.

RESOLVED:

That the report and the ongoing work to manage the impacts that Welfare Reform has and will continue to have upon Flintshire's most vulnerable households be supported.

26. HOUSING RENT INCOME

Councillor Hughes introduced the report which was an operational update on 2020/21 year end housing rent income collection performance for housing, including the 2021/22 latest collection position.

The Chief Officer (Housing and Assets) explained that the outturn for 2020/21 resulted in rent arrears of £1.854m compared to £1.815m in the previous year, an increase in arrears of £39k. The data was positive when contrasted against earlier predictions for rent arrears for the service throughout the last twelve months, particularly at a time when the Covid-19 pandemic had impacted on the ability of some tenants to pay on time.

He also provided information on the introduction of the Breathing Space scheme in England and Wales from May 2021 which was a welcome step as it would provide tenants in debt with a 60 day period of legal protections from their creditors, including what tenants owed in housing rent. The protections included pausing most enforcement action and contact from creditors.

RESOLVED:

That the report be supported, noting the £1.854m year-end position for rent arrears in 2020/21.

27. COMMUNAL HEATING CHARGES 2021/22

Councillor Johnson introduced the report and explained that the portfolio operated eight communal heating schemes within Flintshire. The Council negotiated fuel costs in advance and tenants benefitted from the Council's Industrial and Commercial Contract rate.

New communal heating charges were based on the previous year's energy use ensuring an accurate assessment of costs and impacts (negative or positive) on the heating reserve account.

The proposed recharges for 2021/22 were outlined in the report. In the majority of cases, the recharge to tenants had reduced for 2021/22, which as in other years, would allow Flintshire to recover the projected costs of the heating charges whilst still passing on the benefit of reduced energy costs to tenants.

RESOLVED:

That the changes to the current heating charges at Council properties with communal heating schemes to take effect from 30th August be approved.

28. EXERCISE OF DELEGATED POWERS

An information item on the actions taken under delegated powers was submitted. The actions were as set out below:-

Housing and Assets

- **Council Rent – Application to Write Off Tenancy Arrears**
Financial Procedure Rules (section 5.2) stipulates that individual bad and irrecoverable debts in excess of £5,000 are considered for write off in conjunction with the relevant Cabinet Member. The decision to write off is in respect of one housing tenant who is subject to a Bankruptcy Order. Rent Arrears of £6,278.04 are included in the order which are now irrecoverable as a result of the award of the order.

Streetscene and Transportation

- **Disposal of Surplus Land**

Surplus Flintshire County Council Land – Pentre Halkyn Playing Field to be transferred to a local community group under lease for 27 years, which will include responsibilities for future maintenance.

- **Suspension of Car Parking Charges**

To continue the suspension of car parking charges until 30th September 2021.

Education and Youth

- **Local Authority Appointed School Governors**

Appointment of Local Authority Governor (s) representatives on school governing bodies in accordance with The Government of Maintained Schools (Wales) Regulations 2005.

- **Queensferry Learning Campus – Gas Easement**

To request easements and rights for Wales and West Utilities to be given easement rights for gas connections and associated maintenance to the new buildings on the Queensferry Learning Campus.

Corporate Finance

- **Corporate Debt Write Offs**

Financial Procedure Rules (section 9.6) – Income and Expenditure – stipulate that individual debts between the values of £5,000 and £25,000 shall be reported to the Chief Finance Officer (Corporate Finance Manager/Section 151 Officer) for consideration to write off, in conjunction with the Cabinet Member for Finance.

The schedule gives full details of 3 write offs totalling £35,993.34 and provides the name, address, value and reason for each individual write off where the overall debt is greater than £5,000. All recovery remedies have now been exhausted including the use of debt collection agents and county court action. There is no further action that can be taken to recover the outstanding balance.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985 – TO CONSIDER THE EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED:

That the press and public be excluded for the remainder of the meeting for the following items by virtue of exempt information under paragraph(s) 14 of Part 4 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended).

29. FAMILIES FIRST – CONTRACT 2022/2024 FUNDING

Councillor Roberts introduced the report which sought approval to procure a new Families First funded prevention and support services for up to two years, with an option to extend for one year, subject to Welsh Government (WG) approving further funding.

RESOLVED:

That a re-procurement of the Families First Programme (funded by the Welsh Government) for a period of two years (April 2022 – March 2024) with an option to extend for a further year should it be required.

30. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC IN ATTENDANCE

There were no members of the press or public in attendance.

(The meeting commenced at 10.00 a.m. and ended at 12.40 p.m.)

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Chair